DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 145 479 CS 203 710

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TITLE Theory and Pragmatics in Composition.
PUB DATE Dec 76
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Modern Language Association, December 1976 ; Best copy available

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Applied Linguistics; Cognitive Processes; *Composition (Literary); Conceptual Schemes; *Evaluation Criteria; *Language Usage; *Linguistic Theory; *Psycholinguistics; Standard Spoken Usage
IDENTIFIERS Kintsch (Walter)

ABSTRACT

This discussion delineates five criteria for judging the usefulness of linguistic and psycholinguistic theories. To be of value, a theory must suggest ways of teaching and evaluating language use, it must account both for the meaning of sentences in context and for meaning generated by the relationship between sentences in text, it must allow for the influence of genre on written and spoken prose, it must account for both reading and writing, and it must adopt psychologically valid units of analysis. These criteria are met by the work of cognitive psychologist Walter Kintsch; the usefulness of Kintsch's theory is illustrated through its application to a selection of advertising and news-story text. (KS)

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THEORY AND PRAGMATICS IN COMPOSITION

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TEXT DELIVERED TO THE
M.L.A. , 28 DECEMBER 1976

ELLEN W. NOLD, STANFORD UNIV.

ED145479

IT'S AN EXCITING TIME TO BE AN APPLIED LINGUIST. IT'S AN EXCITING TIME TO BE A TEACHER OR RESEARCHER IN COMPOSITION BECAUSE LINGUISTIC THEORY IS BECOMING MORE AND MORE USEFUL TO US PRAGMATISTS AS THEORETICIANS BEGIN TAKING MORE SENSITIVE AND MORE SUSTAINED LOOKS AT WRITTEN TEXTS AND ATTEMPT TO ACCOUNT FOR THEM IN A GENERAL THEORY OF LANGUAGE. WHEREAS IN 1930, BLOOMFIELD DISMISSED THE WRITTEN TEXT AS MERELY A REPRESENTATION OF SPEECH AND THEREFORE SECONDARY AND UNINTERESTING, IN THE 1970'S, THE REASONS FOR THE DISMISSAL ARE BEING REEXAMINED AND FOUND WANTING. IN A LITERATE SOCIETY WITH AN ONGOING WRITTEN TRADITION, THE WRITTEN LANGUAGE DEVELOPS ITS OWN FORMS, CONVENTIONS AND STYLES, CALLED BY SOME A "GRAPHOLECT." THIS MUST BE TAUGHT. WRITING, EXCEPT FOR THAT PRODUCED BY SMALL CHILDREN, IS NOT MERELY A REPRESENTATION OF SPEECH. THE WRITTEN TEXT IS LINGUISTICALLY AND PSYCHOLOGICALLY INTERESTING IN ITS OWN RIGHT. SEEING THIS, THEORETICIANS ARE NOT ONLY THINKING ABOUT THE TEXT PER SE BUT ARE ALSO WENDING TOWARDS A CONSIDERATION OF HOW A TEXT GETS PRODUCED, A CONSIDERATION OF THE PROCESS OF COMPOSITION.

IN THIS TALK I'D LIKE TO DELINEATE SOME CRITERIA FOR JUDGING THE USEFULNESS OF LINGUISTIC AND PSYCHOLINGUISTIC THEORIES AND ANALYSES. THEN I'D LIKE TO SHOW HOW THESE CRITERIA ARE MET BY THE WORK OF A COGNITIVE PSYCHOLOGIST WELL VERSED IN LINGUISTIC THEORY. HIS NAME IS WALTER KINTSCH, AND HIS WORK IS PRACTICALLY UNKNOWN

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TO APPLIED LINGUISTS AND TEACHERS OF COMPOSITION. I AM PAINFULLY AWARE THAT THE LIMITS OF TIME FORCE ME TO IGNORE IMPORTANT WORK OF LINGUISTS AND PSYCHOLOGISTS PERHAPS BETTER KNOWN TO THIS GROUP, WHOSE WORK MEETS SOME OF THE CRITERIA I WILL DISCUSS A LITTLE LATER. I'M THINKING ESPECIALLY OF THE WORK OF M.A.K. HALLIDAY, ALTON BECKER AND KENNETH PIKE, LISTED IN THE BIBLIOGRAPHY ON THE SECOND PAGE OF THE DITTOED HANDOUT.

THE KEYNOTE OF THE CRITERIA LISTED ON THE FIRST PAGE OF YOUR HANDOUT IS PRAGMATICS, THE MAIN CRITERION BEING WHETHER THE THEORY OR ANALYSIS SUGGESTS WAYS IN WHICH LANGUAGE CAN BE TAUGHT AND EVALUATED. THIS FOCUS EXPLAINS WHY WE APPLIED LINGUISTS ARE UNABASHEDLY ECLECTIC ABOUT OUR CHOICE OF THEORIES ON WHICH TO BASE CURRICULUM AND WHY WE CLING TO THEORIES THAT ARE OUT OF FASHION WITH THE THEORETICAL COMMUNITY. APPLIED LINGUISTS ARE NOT IMPRESSED BY ELEGANT AND INTERNALLY CONSISTENT THEORIES BASED ON DATA THAT ARE TRIVIAL IN THE TOTAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE COMMUNICATIVE ACT. SINCE WE MUST TEACH LANGUAGE IN ALL ITS COMPLEXITY--INTERPRETING AND EXPLAINING ITS SYNTACTICAL, SEMANTICAL, SOCIOLOGICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL REVERBERATIONS--THEORIES WHICH IGNORE THIS COMPLEXITY ARE ONLY MARGINALLY USEFUL TO US. THOSE OF US APPLIED LINGUISTS WHOSE MAJOR INTEREST IS THE WRITTEN LANGUAGE OF NATIVE SPEAKERS FIND EVEN LESS TO HELP US IN LINGUISTIC THEORY THAN THOSE APPLIED LINGUISTS WHO TEACH NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS. CRITERIA 2 THROUGH 4 ARE ESPECIALLY DESIGNED TO REFLECT THE CONCERNS OF THE WRITTEN COMPOSITION TEACHER AND RESEARCHER.

THE SECOND CRITERION IS THAT THE THEORY ACCOUNT BOTH FOR THE GRAMMAR OF SENTENCES AND THE GRAMMAR OF DISCOURSE, BOTH FOR THE SYNTACTIC RULES THAT INTERPRET THE ELEMENTS OF A SENTENCE AND MAKE IT WHOLE AND FOR THE RULES THAT INTERPRET THE ELEMENTS OF A DISCOURSE

AND RENDER IT WHOLE, COHERENT. TRANSFORMATIONAL-GENERATIVE GRAMMAR FULFILLS ONLY HALF THE REQUIREMENT OF THIS CRITERION; LIMITED AS IT IS TO THE GENERATION OF CONTEXTLESS SENTENCES, T-G GRAMMAR HAS NONETHELESS PROVIDED US WITH AN IMPORTANT DISCOVERY--THAT PRACTICE IN SENTENCE COMBINING CAN SIGNIFICANTLY AFFECT THE SYNTACTIC MATURITY OF SCHOOLCHILDREN. BUT COMPOSITION ALWAYS INVOLVES A TEXT AND A CONTEXT, ALWAYS REQUIRES A MOVEMENT FROM ONE SENTENCE TO THE NEXT AND A RECOGNITION OF THE ENVIRONMENT IN WHICH IT WILL BE READ AND UNDERSTOOD. THE READER HIMSELF MUST ALSO ASSUME A CONTEXT, COMPRISED NOT ONLY OF WHAT HE KNOWS ABOUT THE WRITER, THE KIND AND PLACE OF THE WRITING, BUT ALSO ABOUT THE INTENDED AUDIENCE FOR THE COMPOSITON. HE RESPONDS TO THE COMPOSITION IN DIFFERENT WAYS DEPENDING UPON WHETHER HE INCLUDES HIMSELF IN OR EXCLUDES HIMSELF FROM THE PROJECTED INTENDED AUDIENCE.

THE THIRD CRITERION IS RELATED TO THE SECOND IN THAT IT FOCUSSES ON CONTEXTUAL CLUES, BUT THIS TIME CONTEXT IS THE SYSTEMMATIC EXPECTATIONS OF THE AUDIENCE, OFTEN CULTURALLY INSPIRED, ABOUT THE TYPE OR GENRE OF THE DISCOURSE. A TEXT CAN BE JUDGED COHERENT BY STANDARDS OF THE SECOND CRITERION--THAT IS, IT CAN "HANG TOGETHER" PERFECTLY--BUT IT STILL MAY BE INEFFECTIVE AS COMMUNICATION BECAUSE IT IS NOT THE TYPE OF COMMUNICATION THAT AN AUDIENCE EXPECTS. OR, VIEWED FROM THE WRITER'S RATHER THAN THE AUDIENCE'S STANDPOINT, GENRE INFLUENCES THE STYLE OF THE COMMUNICATION, THE STRUCTURE OF THE SENTENCES AND THE DISCOURSE, AND SOMETIMES EVEN THE MEANINGS HE CAN MEAN. IN ADDITION, STANDARDS OF VALIDITY ARE RADICALLY INFLUENCED BY GENRE: WE APPROACH AN ADVERTISEMENT WITH MORE SKEPTICISM THAN A NEWSSTORY, AND A NEWSSTORY WITH MORE SKEPTICISM THAN A SCIENTIFIC REPORT.

FOURTH, THE THEORY SHOULD ACCOUNT BOTH FOR PRODUCTION AND FOR UNDERSTANDING, BOTH FOR WRITING AND FOR READING. THE ATOMISTIC APPROACH TRADITIONAL TO BOTH LINGUISTICS AND PSYCHOLOGY CLEARLY IS NOT USEFUL TO THE PRACTICING TEACHER OF COMPOSITION, WHO IS EMPIRICALLY AWARE OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SKILLS IN WRITING AND IN READING AND WHO LOOKS FOR WAYS TO INCREASE ABILITIES IN BOTH.

PROBABLY THE MOST CONTROVERSIAL CRITERION I HAVE INCLUDED IS NUMBER FIVE: THAT THE UNIT OR UNITS OF ANALYSIS HAVE PSYCHOLOGICAL VALIDITY. I WILL NOT DEFEND THIS CRITERION WITH RASH STOLIDITY; I WILL POINT OUT THAT IT IS EASER TO TEACH USING UNITS OF ANALYSIS THAT ARE INTUITIVELY OBVIOUS OR EASY TO EXPLAIN. SINCE SOME ARTIFICIAL UNITS MAY BE EASILY PERCEIVED, I WILL RELINQUISH MY TOTALITARIAN STANCE IN FAVOR OF PREFERRING THOSE THEORIES WHICH CAN CLAIM PSYCHOLOGICAL VALIDITY FOR THE UNIT OF MEASUREMENT BUT REJECTING NONE JUST BECAUSE THEY CANNOT MAKE THIS CLAIM.

THE MAIN FOCUS OF WALTER KINTSCH'S WORK, HOWEVER, IS PRECISELY ON ESTABLISHING THE PSYCHOLOGICAL VALIDITY OF THE PROPOSITION AS THE UNIT OF ANALYSIS IN BOTH CONGNITIVE PSYCHOLOGY AND LINGUISTICS. IN HIS 1974 BOOK, THE REPRESENTATION OF MEANING IN MEMORY, KINTSCH DEVELOPS A THEORY OF LANGUAGE, A GRAMMAR OF SENTENCES AND OF TEXTS, HEAVILY BASED ON FILLMORE'S CASE GRAMMAR. HE THEN PRESENTS EXPERIMENTAL EVIDENCE WHICH GOES A FAR WAYS IN SUPPORTING IS THEORIES, THOUGH BY NO MEANS DOES IT CONSTITUTE PROOF. IN ORDER TO ILLUSTRATE KINTSCH'S BEST GUESS ABOUT WHAT CONSTITUTES A PROPOSITION, I HAVE MADE A KINTSCHIAN ANALYSIS OF PART OF A TEXT WHICH THE STRUCTURALIST ZELLIG HARRIS FIRST ANALYSED IN HIS IMPORTANT ARTICLE, "DISCOURSE ANALYSIS". THE TEXT AND ANALYSIS APPEAR ON YOUR DITTOED HANDOUT.

THE THREE SENTENCES IN THE TEXT OF THE ADVERTISEMENT CONTAIN ABOUT 20 PROPOSITONS. I SAY "ABOUT" BECAUSE KINTSCH HAS NOT YET DEFINED PRECISELY WHAT A PROPOSITION IS; THEREFORE, MY ANALYSIS IS SOMEWHAT TENTATIVE. KINTSCH'S EXPERIMENTS DO SHOW THAT THE MORE IMPORTANT PROPOSITIONS--THOSE WHICH CONTAIN VERBS (INDICATED BY AN ARROW)--ARE REMEMBERED FOR DAYS, WHILE THE LESS IMPORTANT PROPOSITIONS ARE FORGOTTEN MUCH MORE QUICKLY. FURTHER, THE SURFACE FEATURES OF THE TEXT--FOR INSTANCE, WHETHER A VERB IS ACTIVE OR PASSIVE, OR WHERE AN ADVERBIAL IS EMBEDDED--THESE FEATURES ARE OBLITERATED IN MEMORY IN TWENTY MINUTES OR SO. KINTSCH'S EVIDENCE SHOWS THAT THE NATURE OF THE PROPOSITIONS REMEMBERED FOR LONG PERIODS OF TIME IS MUCH MORE LIKE THAT POSITED BY FILLMORE'S CASE GRAMMAR THAN THAT POSITED BY PHRASE-STRUCTURE GRAMMARS LIKE T-G GRAMMAR. THE MEMORY DOES NOT APPEAR TO FUNCTION BY DIVIDING SENTENCES INTO NP AND VP; RATHER, IT HANGS ONTO THE VERB AS THE PRIMARY ELEMENT IN MEANING, THE OTHER ELEMENTS OF THE SENTENCE ASSUMING CASE RELATIONSHIPS TO THE VERB.

IN ADDITION TO SATISFYING THE SECOND CRITERION--EXPLAINING THE COHERENCE OF TEXTS AS WELL AS OF SENTENCES--AND THE FIFTH CRITERION--USING A PSYCHOLOGICALLY VALID UNIT OF MEASUREMENT--KINTSCH'S THEORY SATISFIES THE THIRD: IT ACCOUNTS FOR GENRE. THE NOTATION BEFORE THE FIRST PROPOSITION IN THE HANDOUT--ADVERTISEMENT--HAS IMPLICATIONS BOTH FOR THE STYLE OF THE TEXT BASE AND THE PRE-SUPPOSITONS WITH WHICH THE READER APPROACHES THE TEXT. ON BOTTOM OF YOUR HANDOUT, I HAVE WRITTEN A NEWSSTORY BASED ON MOST OF THE PROPOSITIONS IN THE ORIGINAL TEXT TO ILLUSTRATE HOW GENRE MAY CHANGE THE SURFACE STRUCTURES ~~AND MEANINGS~~ OF A TEXT.

TESTING THE THEORY AGAINST THE FIRST CRITERION, WE FIND THAT IT DOES IMPLY A SCHEMA FOR THE EVALUATION OF PROSE AS WELL AS OF COGNITIVE STYLES. AFTER CONTROLLING FOR THE NUMBER AND KINDS OF PROPOSITIONS IN A TEXT, ONE MAY WELL BE ABLE TO JUDGE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF DIFFERENT VERSIONS OF A TEXT BY TESTING RELATIVE READING RATES AND COMPREHENSION. OR, CONTROLLING FOR THE PROPOSITIONS, ONE MAY BE ABLE TO TEST HOW WELL DIFFERENT VERSIONS OF A TEXT FULFILL READERS' EXPECTATIONS OF GENRE OR TYPE. IN ADDITION, AN ANALYSIS OF THE KINDS OF PROPOSITIONS MAY WELL GIVE US A GAUGE OF THE COGNITIVE COMPLEXITY AS WELL AS THE LOGICAL VALIDITY OF CERTAIN KINDS OF ARGUMENTATION.

TURNED ON ITS HEAD, KINTSCH'S THEORY OF READING COULD PROVIDE THE BASIS FOR A THEORY OF COMPOSITION. IF IN READING, WE PROCESS THE SURFACE STRUCTURE OF A TEXT, SIMULTANEOUSLY ENCODING IT INTO FAR MORE ABSTRACT MEANING POSTULATES IN MEMORY (AS KINTSCH SUGGESTS), THEN IN WRITING WE WELL MAY BE ATTEMPTING TO TAKE HIGHLY ABSTRACT MEANING POSTULATES IN LONG TERM MEMORY AND ENCODE THEM INTO COHERENT SURFACE STRUCTURES. A FREQUENT COMPLAINT OF OUR STUDENTS--THAT THEY CANNOT EXPRESS THEIR "~~MEANINGS~~ IDEAS" IN "WORDS"-- IS ELUCIDATED BY THIS THEORY, WHILE IT IS IGNORED BY OTHER THEORIES WHICH ASSUME A MECHANICAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN IDEAS AND WORDS, BETWEEN MEANINGS AND ~~THE~~ EXPRESSIONS OF THOSE MEANINGS. FURTHER, THE THEORY SHEDS LIGHT ON THE CONTINUAL ADJUSTMENT OF EXPRESSED MEANING TO INTENDED MEANING IN THE COMPOSING PROCESSES OF MATURE WRITERS: WHILE THE POOR WRITER'S ATTENTION IS CONSUMED BY THE NICETIES OF THE SURFACE STRUCTURES OF HIS WRITING, THE SKILLED WRITER'S ATTENTION IS FOCUSSED ON MEDIATING BETWEEN INTENDED AND PERCEIVED MEANING. THE THEORY ALSO PUTS INTO PERSPECTIVE THE CORRELATION BETWEEN READING AND WRITING

PERFORMANCE: IF A STUDENT IS A SOPHISTICATED TRANSLATOR OF SURFACE CUES TO ABSTRACT, HEIRARCHICAL MEANING STRUCTURES, IT IS LIKELY THAT HE WILL BE A SOPHISTICATED TRANSLATOR OF HEIRARCHICAL MEANING STRUCTURES TO SURFACE CUES.

IT APPEARS, THEN, THAT FILLMORE'S CASE GRAMMAR HAS INFORMED THEORY--NOT ONLY OF KINTSCH BUT OF HALLIDAY--THAT WILL EVENTUALLY BENEFIT THE PRACTICING TEACHER OF LANGUAGE, ~~WE~~THER IT BE TO NATIVE OR NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS. OF COURSE, AS THE HISTORY OF SENTENCE COMBINING SHOWS, STUDENTS NEED NOT BE TAUGHT THE THEORY OR THE GRAMMAR TO BENEFIT FROM THE TEACHING THAT ARISES FROM THEM. THEORY IS USEFUL ONLY IN INFORMING CURRICULA WHICH REFLECT IT, NOT IN ITS PURE STATE, BUT IN ITS PRACTICAL STATE. IN SO FAR AS EACH TEACHER IS A DESIGNER OF CURRICULA, THAT TEACHER MUST UNDERSTAND AND APPRECIATE THE THEORY WHICH UNDERLIE THEM, ~~BUT~~ A STUDENT'S TIME, on the other hand, IS BETTER SPENT IN THE ACTUAL PRACTICE OF LANGUAGE THAN IN THE ANALYSIS OF LANGUAGE. ONLY SO MUCH ANALYSIS AS IS NECESSARY TO SPEED THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PERFORMANCE OF LANGUAGE SHOULD BE REQUIRED OF THE COMPOSITION STUDENT. ANY MORE THAN IS ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY BLURS THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN LINGUISTICS AND APPLIED LINGUISTICS, BETWEEN LEARNING THAT AND LEARNING HOW.

10 copies

MLA

December 28, 1976

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Five criteria for usefulness of linguistic theory

1. Suggests ways of teaching and evaluating language use.
2. Accounts for both the meaning of individual sentences in context and for meaning generated by the relationship (bothephysical and cognitive) of sentences to one another in a text.
3. Allows for the influence of genre on the texts of formal written and spoken prose.
4. Accounts for both production and understanding of texts; for both writing and reading.
5. Adopts psychologically valid unit(s) of analysis.

Analysis (following Kintsch) of a text

Text: Millions Can't Be Wrong!

Millions of consumer bottles of X have been sold since its introduction a few years ago. And four out of five people in a nationwide survey say they prefer X to any hair tonic they've used.

Analysis:

Proposition	Content
	(ADVERTISEMENT, 1-20)
1	(not, 2)
2	(wrong, millions)
3	(TIME: PAST, 4-8)
4	(sell, someone, X)
5	(LOCATION: in bottles, X)
66	(consumer, bottles)
7	(million, bottles)
8	(many, 7)
9	(TIME; a few years ago, 10)
10	(introduce, someone, X)
11	(3-8 since 9-10)
12	(say, people, 16-20)
13	(LOCATION: in survey, people)
14	(nationwide, survey)
15	(four, people)
16	(SAMPLE: indefinite, but greater than five, 15)
17	(prefer, people, X, tonic)
18	(hair, tonic)
19	(use, people, 18)
20	(TIME; past, 19)

News story: PEOPLE PREFER X

Four out of five people who responded to a nationwide survey preferred X to other hair tonics they have used. Since its introduction a few years ago, millions of bottles were sold.

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